

## COMMENTARY


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# Tying Teacher Evaluation to Student Achievement

## Caution, Yellow Light Ahead

By Susan H. Fuhrman

The Obama administration, through its Race to the Top initiative, is encouraging states to develop approaches for evaluating teachers that incorporate student-achievement results. This aspect of the program has been controversial, prompting some teachers' unions to refuse to endorse state applications for competitive federal grants. However, a number of efforts to develop such indices of teacher effectiveness are under way, and the American Federation of Teachers' president, Randi Weingarten, has publicly endorsed including student-achievement results along with other measures to evaluate teacher success.

It is likely, then, that some form of teacher evaluation linked to student achievement will play a significant role in a number of upcoming policy initiatives. It is therefore critical, in order to ensure fairness to teachers, that any plans to reward or punish them for gains their students have or have not made control for differences among students in their family situations and other factors that are beyond the teachers' control. The best method for ensuring that evalua-

tion includes such controls is called the value-added approach.

Recently, the National Research Council and the National Academy of Education jointly issued a report on value-added approaches, based on findings from a November 2008 workshop funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and co-sponsored by the NRC and the NAED. The report's goal was to provide policymakers with an improved understanding of the potential role of value-added methodologies, given their known strengths and weaknesses, so that officials could then better decide whether (and how) to implement them in their jurisdictions.

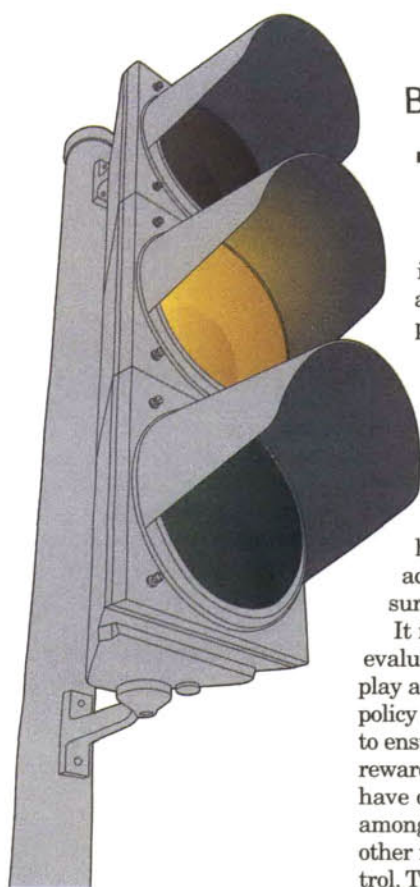
According to the report, "value-added models" refer to a variety of sophisticated statistical techniques that measure student growth and use one or more years of prior student test scores, as well as other background data, to adjust for pre-existing differences among students when calculating contributions to student test performance.

Current accountability systems rely predominantly on the "percent of children reaching proficiency," which educational measurement experts call a "status" measure. Schools making good progress but not yet reaching desired average levels of achievement are not rewarded,

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and schools with high-achieving students have no further incentive to improve if they've already reached the mandated proficiency level. Workshop participants were generally positive about adding measures of growth to status measures in accountability systems.

They voiced less support, however, for using value-added measures for high-stakes decisions, especially about individual teachers. One reason is that it is currently impossible to use test-score gains for the large number of teachers whose students are not given standardized tests, including those teaching in the earliest grades and those in subjects like art, music, and social studies, where standardized tests are not routinely used. And it would be most unfortunate if attempts to improve teacher accountability exac-



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# Good Intentions Gone Badly Wrong

By William A. Proefriedt

The latest effort to reform teacher education strikes me as a tale of good intentions gone badly wrong. We repeat in miniature the approach the school reformers take on a larger canvas. Like them, we have, with the best of intentions, seized on ideas that show great promise, carried them beyond reasonable limits, and ignored the complexity of the issues with which we are engaged.

Here is the alluring if oversimplified logic behind the latest approach to the reform of teacher education: The purpose of undergraduate and graduate programs for teachers is to prepare them to successfully educate young people in K-12 classrooms. Since we already measure the achievement of K-12 students through a variety of standardized tests, it seems sensible to evaluate the quality of a teacher education program by the criterion of how well the students of its graduates, all other things being equal, do on these standard measures of academic achievement. The teacher education programs that have the most positive impact on teacher effectiveness will then serve as models to be emulated by others.

Until recently, the task of making connections between the academic achievement of K-12 students and the preparation of their teachers has been too tangled a project to tackle. Outcomes-based teacher-educators and state education department officials

settled for determining a number of teacher behaviors that seemed to enhance student learning. They then required teacher-candidates to demonstrate competency in these in order to acquire certification. Demonstrating such competencies seemed superior as a predictor of teacher effectiveness to completing a set of courses or a degree.

Given the new sense of urgency about narrowing achievement gaps, and supported by new technologies and more statistical sophistication, state education departments, the U.S. Department of Education, and various universities will soon be tracking the connection between teacher education programs and the test scores of K-12 students. One teacher education institution has already placed a full-page ad on the inside cover of a leading research journal claiming that the students of graduates of its reading and literacy program "had gains in reading fluency that were on average 4.8 words per minute, or 14 percent greater than students" of teachers who had received master's degrees from other programs.

In a major speech on teacher preparation, given at Teachers College, Columbia University, this past October, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan urged teacher-educators to "make better outcomes for students the overarching mission that propels all their efforts." He called on states and districts to put in place longitudinal-data systems allowing them to track student

performance and growth on subject-matter tests to the teacher education programs that prepared the students' teachers.

When Secretary Duncan tells his audience that "to keep America competitive, and to make the American dream of equal educational opportunity a reality, we need to recruit, reward, train, learn from, and honor a new generation of talented teachers," he reminds us of the ways in which

**“** We have taken promising ideas, oversimplified them, and proclaimed that we are on the road to better teacher education programs.”

American teachers, and teacher-educators, have always seen their work as a missionary endeavor. He is Catharine Beecher encouraging her teachers to found schools in the newly opened Western territories; he is W.E.B. Du Bois praising the women of New England who taught the children of the freedmen during Reconstruction; he is Jane Addams, inspiring the social workers in America's cities to respond to the wave

of European immigrants in the early part of the last century.

Again today, the schools, overreaching themselves, claim primary responsibility for the nation's achieving equality of opportunity at home and economic competitiveness on the world stage. And we teacher-educators see ourselves as responsible for the success of the schools in their dual mission. Further, we now assert the ability to trace the link between the educational achievement of students and the quality of the teacher education institutions in which their teachers were trained.

Holding teacher education programs responsible for the quality of the teachers they graduate seems reasonable. Measuring the quality of teachers primarily by the educational achievement of their students is appealing. If we have the statistical sophistication to trace student scores on achievement tests to the programs preparing our teachers, why not do so? Won't such transparency set off a healthy competition to turn out teachers able to enhance the measured educational achievement of their charges?

When teacher-educators enlist in this latest educational crusade, their intentions are noble, but they are blind to the complexity of the task. It lies not just in the difficulty of teasing out teacher effects on measured student achievement, or in con-



erated one of the most criticized aspects of current accountability systems, namely the overreliance on standardized tests.

Moreover, even in the cases where tests already exist, such as for teachers of reading and mathematics in grades 3-8, value-added approaches raise significant concerns. Recent research suggests that they give an accurate picture of teacher-related gains in achievement only if students are randomly assigned to teachers. But if, for example, administrators systematically assign struggling students to the "best" teachers (as may be the case in many schools) or to new, inexperienced teachers (as is the case in many other schools), those teachers' measured gains relative to those of their colleagues will likely suffer.

**T**here are a number of other concerns about the implementation of value-added models, including the following:

- Many tests cover sufficiently different content from one grade to the next that score gains do not have the same meaning across grades. Many state assessments, in fact, are not scaled to measure grade-to-grade growth or to make growth comparisons.
- Value-added estimates for a teacher can fluctuate for a variety of reasons, many not necessarily related to actual effectiveness at producing student gains on achievement tests. For example, high turnover of students throughout the year can affect the gains students make on achievement tests; and, if the

class size is small, the scores of only a few students can affect the size of the gains. These kinds of errors can be reduced—but not eliminated—if administrators take several years of teacher performance into account when making important decisions.

• Factors other than an individual teacher's efforts affect student performance in any given year. These include the efforts of other teachers involved with a student, the extent of support the student receives outside of school in completing homework and learning the material (tutoring, parental help, and the like), and other family and societal factors that might influence student achievement.

The lesson of the NRC-NAED report is that even though value-added methodologies offer a number of advantages over other approaches that consider test-score data in a vacuum, policymakers need to move carefully in adopting any approach—value-added or otherwise—in making important decisions about individual teachers. Value-added approaches hold great promise, but there is a need to develop better tests (and other thoughtful measures of student learning) and better measures of teacher practice to use along with test scores, so they are not the sole factor used to evaluate teacher effectiveness. ■

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necting current teacher practice to past teacher education programs. The more serious problem concerns our definition of student achievement. At some level we and Secretary Duncan both know that the tests do not quite capture it.

In another place in his Teachers College speech, Duncan says: "A great teacher can literally change the course of a student's life. They light a lifelong curiosity, a desire to participate in democracy, and instill a thirst for knowledge." He ends his talk with Henry Adams' encomium to teachers: "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops." These are more than empty phrases designed to please an audience. They reveal Duncan's understanding that the real work of teachers involves more than producing in their charges adequate scores on standardized tests.

To make real our good intentions, we leap at oversimplifications. We unwisely accept test scores as a facsimile of student learning. In doing so, we talk ourselves into believing we are holding our schools, and now our teacher education institutions, accountable. Accountability of institutions is necessary in a democratic society. We have good intentions—but we act with willful blindness. For we surely know, with John Dewey, and with Arne Duncan in his better moments, that student learning, achievement, and intelligence involve, among a host of other things, the growing capacity to make meaning out of new experiences, a capacity that the testers, to their credit, make no claim

to measure. We know that test scores do not get at the curiosity, the thirst for knowledge, and the commitment to democracy of which Duncan speaks, but, recklessly, we act as if they do.

Tests quite often have significant value, and a rich variety of pedagogical uses. Finally, though, students' test scores represent their performance on a single occasion, on a small sample of test items, most likely in a paper-and-pencil format, relating to an equally small sample of learning objectives in the content area tested. We go beyond all reasonable limits when we take the test scores as a proxy of student achievement or as a measure of the quality of the programs from which teachers graduated. We have been bewitched by the real promise of quantifying certain abilities, by our understandable desire to hold our institutions accountable, and by the significance we attach to our calling. We have taken promising ideas, oversimplified them, and proclaimed that we are on the road to better teacher education programs, better schools, more educational opportunity, making America competitive, and to pie in the sky by and by. ■

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# How to Close The Digital Divide? Fund Public Libraries

By Donna C. Celano & Susan B. Neuman

**T**ough times call for tough measures. And for the nation's public libraries, times could not be tougher. When it comes to balancing city budgets, local libraries are often one of the first institutions to feel the heat. In Philadelphia in 2008, Mayor Michael Nutter became the center of controversy when he proposed closing 11 libraries, nearly all in poor neighborhoods, to bring the budget into line. And library budgets have faced the chopping block this year in cities in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, and other states.

While this course of action may seem to be a quick fix to a city's economic woes, closing libraries renders a crushing blow to the nation's neediest children. Not only does it shut off their access to books and other printed materials that promote literacy, but it also has another serious side effect: widening the digital divide.

Having studied for a decade children's use of books and computers, the two of us have warned for some time that the public library often is the only place outside of school that a poor child can find a book. We argue now that public libraries may be the only place outside of school where low-income children can use a computer and learn to navigate the Internet.

Although there is evidence that gaps in in-school computer use between poor and middle-income children may be closing, computer use outside of school is nowhere close to being equal. U.S. Census figures show that few low-income children have Internet access at home. While half of all children with annual family incomes of \$75,000 or above have such access, just 15 percent of those with incomes between \$20,000 and \$25,000 do.

To be sure, there are community agencies and recreation centers that offer computer and Internet access, but for most poor children, the local library remains the surest and most convenient alternative. Public libraries have long filled a tremendous educational need in poor communities by providing print materials, computers, and other services to underserved populations. Now, with more than 95 percent of libraries offering Internet access, about 10 percent of all Internet users look to the library as their only source of such access.

What is lost when we cut off poor children's access to computers becomes more apparent when we compare how they spend their out-of-school time with how their middle-class peers do. Here, the advantages of online access are clear. While poor children are watching television or "hanging out," middle-class children are digitally active. Lots of this time, of course, may be spent watching videos on YouTube, playing online games, or chatting with their friends. But they also complete homework assignments online, do research, and visit school-related Web sites. They be-

come more familiar with Google, Yahoo, and other search engines than their low-income peers, and they learn to find their way around the Internet with greater ease.

With assistance from parents and caregivers, these more-affluent kids start using the computer at a younger age. As they grow, they gain more knowledge than their peers from poor neighborhoods. In later years, they will be experts in certain areas, while poor children will be left back, without an equal chance to succeed in a technology-driven world.

Ironically, the pressure to slash library budgets comes at a time when library use is at its highest. In hard economic times, libraries provide a safety net, as the newly unemployed who have been shut off from Internet access at work come to use the libraries' computers and other resources. The demand for library services is skyrocketing, particularly in financially hard-hit communities. Yet it is the libraries in high-poverty areas, those that serve our poorest children and offer pockets of

**“Ironically, the pressure to slash library budgets comes at a time when library use is at its highest.”**

hope amid steep rates of unemployment, that are the most likely to close.

In a national survey of librarians, we found that these professionals are keenly aware of the digital divide and its ramifications, and that they are willing to help close it. But without adequate funding, they say, their libraries will not be able to continue doing this vital work. They cannot provide print resources to help enhance poor children's literacy skills, the first step to gaining knowledge and succeeding in school. Nor can they give students access to computers and the Internet, so that they can continue to grow their knowledge base and succeed in a modern world.

Even before budget cuts, many libraries were not able to fill their communities' needs for knowledge and information. Continuing to slash their budgets will only make matters worse, and will widen the digital divide for poor children. Cutting library funding may be a short-term economic fix, but if our long-term goal is an equitable and educated populace, it is the wrong idea at the wrong time. ■

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